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# Commencement address

Douglas M. Knight

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by  
Douglas Knight

June 9, 1957

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Graduating Class,

I'm afraid that I am sorely tempted to succumb to one of those 'last time' privileges. Perhaps it's the impact of another birthday, perhaps it's the prospect of so cool a day and so distinguished an audience, but I feel in an ageing and preachifying state of mind. And yet I question whether I can get away with it; you know me too well, you were here a term before I was and you've been forcing me to try to catch up ever since. And I see a stern, well-educated gleam in your eyes that tells me I won't get away with anything at all. On second thought, I'd like to think with you about something instead of preaching at you. And the 'something' involved is the College itself, rather than a grandiloquent and empty observation on the future. I have made that grand and empty speech, I fear, and I probably will again -- but not today. Instead I'd like to come at the future by the rather old-fashioned means of asking what the past has been -- and of asking particularly what the emerging coherence of these four years of your past has been.

There are two main aspects of your immediate past, as far as I am concerned: first those things which would be true at any time of your education in a first-rate College; and second those things which have been particularly true during the past four years in this place. Or to put it another way, there are recurrent values in your education, ones that you

'share with many other classes, and there are emergent or unique ones, ones that belong to your own time and place. And as you graduate you are entitled to recognize them both; for crucial aspects of your future, and of our continuing concern with your future, are embodied in this living past.

The first or 'permanent' quality which you have absorbed exists as an attitude toward learning in us here at Lawrence; and will continue in you, I hope, as an attitude toward responsible living in general. We expect, and have taught you to expect, that the simple attitude toward a problem, the simple answer to it, is very likely not to be the adequate or even the relevant answer. One must often act on complex evidence, and believe in complex answers as though they were simple; but this is totally different from the delusive idea that in fact they are simple.

Now if we have given you this sense of complexity, how has it happened? To a considerable extent, of course, through your individual work in specific courses, where you have discovered to your pain and your profit the equal difficulty and necessity of coming at the truth. But you have been learning the same thing in other and perhaps equally persuasive ways, ways which root themselves very deeply in the spirit of this particular kind of college. I think above all of the fact that we have a more complex expectation of you and of ourselves than even a great university can bring to life for any individual student or faculty member. You know that I do not say this in criticism of Chicago or Harvard; I say it to call our attention to a richness of purpose at Lawrence not commonly enough understood. In the sciences, for instance, we have three major obligations, and we are trying to live up to them all. First, we have tried to help each of you to basic scientific literacy. Second, we have

helped a good many of you to solid competence which should stand by itself, since it will not be strengthened and extended by graduate work in the same field. And third, we have prepared a smaller group of you to undertake that graduate work, so that you in turn can make the colleges and universities of the future possible. Equally in the social sciences or the humanities, equally in the conservatory, we have an obligation to many levels of competence, many kinds of understanding--and above all to the relationship of these kinds of understanding. We wish many of you to achieve a unique distinction in the field of your special interest; but because the College as a whole serves these many purposes we ask you to be aware of them too; and to know that above all and beyond all we justify ourselves here at Lawrence by your achievement as educated men and women rather than as gifted specialists. This is the reason for Freshman Studies, the reason for requirements in fields quite alien to your special interests, the reason for a whole way of life here which puts its emphasis on the complexity and the manysidedness of experience, not as a substitute for wise concentration, but as the necessary counterbalance to it. 1 quite

This has been our great continuing purpose, for you and for ourselves. But there have been other and equal purposes which have emerged during your four years and which each individual must express for himself, build for himself in a unique way. And the curious thing is that, unless I am much mistaken, these purposes have emerged for the College as well as for you during your years here. To say so much is not to imply any discontinuity with Lawrence's past--but rather the very opposite, a continuing discovery of that past and the guiding emphasis which it gives to our future. Those of us responsible for Lawrence's present can claim no more

than that we have seen come to consciousness that mysterious thing which we call the spirit of a college. Like the spirit, the individuality of a person, the spirit of a college involves two chief qualities -- qualities which you have been developing as people, and which you have helped the College to express about itself. Both are included, perhaps, in self-awareness, if by it we mean that proper consciousness of your particular excellence on the one hand and your unfulfilled promise on the other. Unless you have a firm grasp on both these qualities we have failed you and you have failed yourselves; for the hope of your future exists in the creative relationship between your secure sense of the value of what you are and your less clear, but equally urgent sense of the value of what you might be but are not. It is the conversation between these two, often the tension between them, that urges you toward a maturity which might make even your present distinguished attainments seem as nothing.

And, like you, the College must depend for its continuing growth on the same dialectic, the same tension between what it has become and what it might become. As alumni it will be one of your pleasant duties, I hope, to keep us moving steadily from the fact of ourselves to the vision of ourselves. You must keep us constantly aware that without our vision we perish; and if you do so you will stand in the best tradition of Lawrence, which has from the beginning concerned itself with a demanding vision, a dream of what might be powerful enough to jar present reality. Because of that dream the community around us is celebrating its Centennial this year; and in part, at least, because we go on having dreams and showing the power to realize them, Appleton can look forward to a second century of distinction to match its first.



I mention these things, these local details, because you should recognize them about your college, as about yourselves. And you should recognize this also; the growth toward some dreamed-of purpose must be organic to you, as it must be to Lawrence. The difference between fantasy and vision exists precisely here, that fantasy is ultimately a flight from reality, while vision is the power to lay hold on some new reality before it becomes obvious to every eye. Our hope for you, and the hope for Lawrence that I want you to take with you in your hearts as you leave, is that we shall all be possessed by this kind of vision, and by the daily, difficult courage that is called for if we are to carry it out.